Most revolutions end up with a counter revolution, and disillusionment.

The French Revolution of 1848, or February Revolution, was a wave of civil unrest in Paris from February 22–24, 1848. Driven by widespread discontent over political disenfranchisement and economic hardship, the uprising forced the abdication of King Louis-Philippe and established the French Second Republic.

Key Drivers and Events:

- Catalysts: A ban on political banquets (used by the opposition to campaign for electoral reform) and a severe economic crisis led to protests by a coalition of radical republicans, liberal monarchists, and the working class.
- The Climax: On February 23, the National Guard defected to the protesters. The

following day, King Louis-Philippe abdicated, and the Second Republic was proclaimed by a provisional government.

- Reforms: The new government instituted universal male suffrage and established National Workshops to provide relief for the unemployed.
- Aftermath: Deep ideological divides between moderate republicans and radical socialists led to the violent "June Days" uprising in Paris, which was suppressed by the military. This conservative backlash eventually paved the way for the rise of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte, who dismantled the republic.
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Hence, the revolution achieved practically nothing, but led to a worse situation.
This observation has occupied some of the greatest historians and political philosophers of the last two centuries. The Revolution of February 1848, which initially seemed to herald liberty and democracy across Europe,

quickly descended into repression, reaction, and, in France, the authoritarian rule of Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte. It became one of history's classic examples of how revolutions often produce outcomes opposite to those their participants imagined.

The question is whether this is an accident of history or a recurring pattern.

The pattern of revolution

Many revolutions appear to move through similar stages.

1. An old order loses legitimacy.

Economic hardship, corruption, inequality, or military failure weaken the existing regime. Examples include:

- France before 1789
- Russia before 1917
- France under Louis-Philippe before 1848
- Iran before 1979

People unite despite having very different visions of the future.

2. Revolutionary unity

At first, everyone seems to agree.

Liberals, workers, intellectuals, students, religious reformers, merchants, and even moderate aristocrats march together.
The common enemy hides their deep disagreements.
This was exactly what happened in Paris in February 1848.

3. Victory creates division
Once the old regime falls, the difficult question arises:
Who should rule now?
The coalition fragments.
Liberals want constitutional government.
Workers demand economic equality.
Radicals seek complete transformation.
Moderates want stability.
The revolution suddenly has many competing definitions.
This happened almost immediately after February 1848.

The June Days uprising, where the republican government crushed Parisian workers, marked the breakdown of revolutionary solidarity.
Karl Marx regarded this as the moment when class conflict emerged openly.
4. Fear of chaos
Ordinary people begin fearing disorder more than oppression.
Commerce stops.
Crime rises.
Political violence increases.
Inflation appears.
Many citizens conclude:
"Perhaps the old government wasn't so bad."
This longing for order becomes politically powerful.

5. Counter-revolution
A strong leader promises peace.
The public willingly sacrifices some liberty for stability.
France elected Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte overwhelmingly in December 1848.

Only three years later he staged the coup of 1851 and established the Second Empire.
Ironically, a revolution begun in the name of republican liberty ended in imperial rule.

Tocqueville's insight

Alexis de Tocqueville witnessed the Revolution of 1848 firsthand.
He observed that revolutions rarely occur when oppression is at its worst.
Instead, societies become revolutionary when conditions begin improving but expectations rise even faster.
People tolerate misery longer than frustrated hope.
This remains one of the most influential explanations of revolutionary politics.

Hegel's dialectic

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel saw history moving through contradictions.
Every political order (thesis)
creates opposition (antithesis),

which produces a new order (synthesis).
But every synthesis eventually becomes another thesis that generates fresh contradictions.
History therefore never reaches permanent equilibrium.
Revolutions are moments within an ongoing process rather than final destinations.

Marx's interpretation

Karl Marx devoted an entire work, The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte, to explaining why the Revolution of 1848 ended with Bonaparte.
His famous opening reads:
History repeats itself, first as tragedy, then as farce.
Marx argued that

- the bourgeoisie feared socialism more than dictatorship;
- peasants desired order;
- workers were isolated after the June Days.

The counter-revolution therefore succeeded because the revolutionary coalition had collapsed.

Albert Camus' interpretation

In The Rebel, Camus argued that revolutions often betray themselves because they seek absolute justice.
When perfection becomes the goal, any means become acceptable.
Violence is justified in the name of a future paradise.
Eventually, the revolution resembles the tyranny it overthrew.
His famous observation is essentially:
Every revolution eventually creates a police force stronger than the one it destroyed.
Camus was thinking not only of France but especially of the Soviet Revolution.

Hannah Arendt

Hannah Arendt distinguished between liberation and freedom.
Destroying an old regime is liberation.
Building institutions capable of preserving freedom is much harder.
Many revolutions succeed at the first task but fail at the second.
Power vacuums invite ambitious leaders.

Edmund Burke's warning

Edmund Burke, writing after the French Revolution of 1789, warned that society resembles a living organism.
Destroying long-established institutions overnight creates chaos because customs, laws, and traditions cannot be replaced instantly.
Whether one agrees with Burke or not, later revolutions often seemed to confirm his concern that abrupt destruction could produce

instability followed by authoritarian restoration.

Why does this happen repeatedly?
Several recurring dynamics make counter-revolution likely:

- Revolutionary coalitions are united by what they oppose, not by what they want.
- Institutions are easier to destroy than to build.
- Economic disruption creates public demand for order.
- Charismatic leaders can exploit uncertainty.
- Idealism often gives way to the practical need for administration, security, and compromise.

As the sociologist Max Weber observed, the charismatic energy of revolutionary movements eventually becomes "routinized" into bureaucratic structures.

Is this inevitable?

Not necessarily.
Some revolutions have resulted in relatively durable constitutional systems, though usually only after prolonged conflict, compromise, and institutional development.
The American Revolution is often cited as an example where institution-building accompanied independence from the outset.
The Glorious Revolution of 1688 in England also produced a relatively stable constitutional settlement. Even these cases involved exclusions, conflicts, and gradual evolution rather than immediate fulfillment of revolutionary ideals.
This suggests that the pattern is common but not universal.

A philosophical reflection
The Revolution of 1848 illustrates a broader truth about political life: people desire both freedom and order, but these values can come into tension. During oppression, freedom seems paramount; during disorder, stability

often becomes the overriding concern. Counter-revolutions succeed when they convince enough people that only a strong hand can restore normal life.

This theme extends beyond politics. As Camus suggested in The Rebel, rebellion begins with a justified "no" to injustice, but if it loses sight of limits and human dignity, it can become another form of domination. Revolutions, in this view, are not only political events but moral tests: they reveal how difficult it is to replace an unjust order without reproducing some of its features under a new name.